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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI IMMEDIATE 7427
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEATRS/TREASURY DEPT WASHDC IMMEDIATE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TOKYO 001755

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [JA](#)

SUBJECT: POLICY ENTERS THE JAPANESE ELECTION

REF: A. TOKYO 1731

[1](#)B. TOKYO 1706

[1](#)C. TOKYO 1686

Classified By: CDA JAMES P. ZUMWALT, REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Japan's major political parties released their campaign platforms this week, directing voter attention to the issues that will decide next month's general election of the Diet's lower house. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) will run under the mantra of "regime change," while the ruling Liberal Democratic Party will contrast its experience with the "irresponsible" economic and foreign policies of the DPJ. Japanese voters, suffering from the worst economic recession in half a century, care about bread-and-butter issues like employment, pensions, health care and economic policy, but have had difficulty distinguishing clear-cut differences between the two parties in these areas. The clearest policy differences exist, rather, in the two parties' treatment of foreign policy, government reform, and the budget. Policy platforms have also to some extent been shaped by smaller parties, whose support may be necessary to form a government, and by a decentralization movement led by a group of popular governors. The imminence of the election has caused the DPJ to adopt more pragmatic policies, the LDP to sharpen its criticism of the opposition, and the smaller parties to become more shrill.

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The Role of Policy in the Election
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[1](#)2. (C) Before the release of the election platforms this week, the election had centered less on specific policy differences between the two parties and instead more on general notions of "change" vs. "experience." Although the 2008 U.S. presidential election, which received wide media coverage in Japan, is thought to have helped make normally risk-averse Japanese voters more open to a message of "change," the largest cause of voters shifting to the opposition party has been dissatisfaction with the ruling LDP, which over the past four years has gone through four prime ministers and overseen a number of embarrassing setbacks, including the loss of millions of pension records. The DPJ - the membership of which ranges from conservative former LDP members to former Socialist Party stalwarts - has tried to keep the policy debate as vague as possible in order

to maintain internal stability and give the opposition little ammunition for criticism.

13. (C) Because neither party had seriously debated the issues at stake, a poll conducted by the Yomiuri Shimbun and Waseda University before the release of the parties' platforms showed that fewer than 30% of voters thought there were "clear-cut policy differences" between the two parties. Although the release of the platforms appears, to some extent, to have shined the spotlight back on policies, voters still may have trouble differentiating the two parties' positions because they are so similar in many areas. The DPJ is reluctant to stray from the safety of LDP positions on a number of minor issues, while the LDP, unwilling to cede popular reforms like restrictions on "hereditary politics" to the opposition, has created its own similar proposals. Polls show that voters, worried about historic levels of unemployment and the fraying of Japan's social safety net, care most about bread and butter issues like employment, pensions, health care, a declining birthrate and economic policy. Moreover, voters are registering historically high levels of interest in the coming election and report, by a 2-1 margin, that they will vote according to policy platforms, not affiliation with a political party. As a result, neither party can much longer afford to ignore the public's calls to address the issues. Indeed, the LDP's best and last chance to reverse the opposition's momentum may be to refocus the public's attention on the few policy differences it does have with the DPJ while calling into question the opposition's ability to effectively govern.

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Foreign Policy
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14. (C) One area where the LDP has tried to highlight differences between itself and the DPJ is foreign policy. Prime Minister Aso and his party have worked to cultivate the image that only the LDP and its 50-year track record can manage the U.S.-Japan Alliance and defend Japan during uncertain times. The LDP campaign platform includes pledges to "maintain the U.S.-Japan alliance as the foundation of Japanese foreign policy," review constitutional and other restrictions on collective self-defense, and quickly enact legislation that allows Japan's Self Defense Forces (SDF) to participate in U.N. peacekeeping operations. The LDP has criticized DPJ foreign policies as irresponsible and lacking detail. One lawmaker said of the DPJ's flip-flopping on Japan's refueling mission in the Indian Ocean, "We cannot leave Japan to a party that hesitates to deal with a commonsense matter and cannot produce a unified view." SEE REFTEL A.

15. (C) The DPJ, however, has been forced to modulate certain foreign policy positions because of internal divisions and gaps with its (sometimes) voting partner, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which strongly opposes the dispatch of the SDF overseas. The DPJ is walking a fine line, trying to both reassure Japan's conservative electorate that it will take a pragmatic approach to security policy while simultaneously making enough concessions - such as leader Yukio Hatoyama's remark that a DPJ-led government would not renew Japan's re-fueling operation - to satisfy its more liberal and ideological membership and partners. Though its policies lack specifics, the DPJ has promised to turn the U.S.-Japan alliance into a more "equal partnership" and to focus on improving relations with its Asian neighbors. Foreign policy, however, occupies only a small space in the DPJ's campaign platform, and a DPJ government will likely make its initial focus the very bread-and-butter domestic issues that are attracting most of the voters' attention. SEE REFTEL B.

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¶6. (C) In terms of their domestic policy promises, the parties differ more in the specifics of their programs than in their general ideologies. Government reform is an election issue of much interest to the public. The DPJ has announced its plan to end decades of the "bureaucracy-oriented politics" supposedly favored by the LDP by diluting the power of senior-ranked bureaucrats and moving towards a Kantei (prime minister's office)-centered decision making process. The LDP has espoused DPJ calls for limiting hereditary candidates in future Diet elections and reducing the number of seats in the Lower House, likely due to public support for such reforms. Decentralization is another aspect of government reform that has evolved into a major campaign issue, but here as well, both the LDP and DPJ have proposed their own specific ways of achieving the same ultimate goal, which is popular with the public.

¶7. (C) Child support and education make up one more policy field in which the two major parties are striving to differentiate themselves. The DPJ has said it intended to introduce a monthly child allowance of 26,000 yen (about 268 U.S. dollars), while the LDP's proposal includes free education for preschool children aged between 3 and 5 over the next four years. The DPJ is not without its own proposals for subsidized education; it has stated its intention to provide subsidies equivalent to tuition fees for households with students in public high schools. In contrast, the LDP platform advocates the creation of a free high school education system and a grant-type college scholarship system strictly for low-income households.

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The Impact of Smaller Parties on the Policy Debate

¶8. (C) The DPJ currently depends upon the support of the People's New Party (PNP) and Social Democratic Party (SDP) for an opposition majority in the Upper House, so even if the DPJ gains a majority of seats in the coming Lower House elections, it will still need the support of these smaller parties to pass its legislative agenda. In addition, DPJ leadership is determined not to repeat the mistakes of the Hosokawa administration - one of only two coalition governments to hold power in the past 50 years that was not headed by the LDP - which was unable to pass meaningful legislation because of internal divisions. It fell apart in less than a year. To avoid a similar fate, the DPJ has increased coordination with smaller parties. For example, the DPJ has chosen not to run its own candidates in certain districts, instead using its support to help important members of the PNP and SDP get elected. Although these parties mostly agree with the DPJ on domestic issues, they do not want Japan to develop a more active security policy and oppose foreign policy measures like the constitutional revision of Japan's peace constitution and dispatch of SDF forces overseas. SEE REFTEL C.

¶9. (C) Another development that will likely affect the policy process should the DPJ take power is the role of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) as a "constructive opposition party." The highly ideological party's recent statement that it "will cooperate with the government if a policy is good, but if a policy is wrong, we will oppose it" represents a break from its tradition of not cooperating with the government party. In another indication that the JCP has become more pragmatic as its core membership ages and revenues shrink, the party decided to field only 152 candidates for lower house electoral districts, a sharp decline from the 275 candidates it fielded during the previous election. These moves have been welcomed by the DPJ, which stands to gain protest and other votes that otherwise

would have gone to the JCP.

The Wildcard: Calls for Decentralization by Popular Governors

¶10. (C) While the DPJ has been forced to modify its policies to gain the support of potential partners, both the DPJ and LDP have included decentralization reform in their campaign platforms as a way to court a group of local governors led by the popular and outspoken governor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto. The young and charismatic Hashimoto belongs to the LDP but has said that he would endorse, through the National Governors' Association (NGA), whichever party offers the most comprehensive decentralization reforms. Although he had earlier assigned higher marks to the DPJ than to the LDP according to his own "decentralization rating scale," Hashimoto strongly criticized the DPJ's campaign platform for lacking an official framework for national and local leaders to discuss policies. That this criticism prompted DPJ leader Hatoyama to announce that his party's platform, which had been released days earlier to much fanfare, was only "an unofficial working copy" (thereby allowing the DPJ to accommodate Hashimoto's request in its final, "official" version) shows the influence possessed by the NGA. Hashimoto's personal popularity and name recognition have made both parties eager to earn his endorsement.
ZUMWALT